DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 343 UD 022 695

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TITLE In Search of the Means To a Better Life: Caribbean Migration to the United States.
PUB DATE 10 Mar 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Five College Black Studies Seminar Series (Amherst, MA, March 10, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT New England Journal of Black Studies; n2 p28-42 1981-1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Developing Nations; Economic Development; *Economic Factors; Foreign Countries; *Immigrants; *Labor Supply; *Migration; Political Influences; *Public Policy; Racial Discrimination; Refugees
IDENTIFIERS *Caribbean; United States

ABSTRACT

Caribbean migration to the United States has largely resulted from capital investment in the region. Such investment attracted labor to areas targeted for high economic development, and when employment opportunities in those areas dwindled, the migrants headed toward the United States, where industries welcomed these sources of cheap labor. While early United States immigration policy favored the entrance of Europeans over other immigrants, changes in policy after 1965 brought in greater numbers of migrants from Third World countries. Caribbean migration to the United States remains economically motivated for the most part. However, recent immigration for political reasons has made it difficult to distinguish between economic and political refugees, and has complicated the American immigration policy making process. Recent Caribbean immigrants include many women and professional and skilled workers who aspire for upward mobility. It is not clear whether Caribbean countries have lost or gained from their citizens' emigration; what is clear is that the United States has benefited from the influx of both trained and unskilled workers. Among immigrants themselves, entrance into American society may allow some to achieve economic mobility, but may push others into the ranks of the urban underclass. (MJL)

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In Search of the Means to a Better Life: Caribbean Migration the the United States

by Monica H. Gordon

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Monica H. Gordon

IN SEARCH OF THE MEANS TO A BETTER LIFE: CARIBBEAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES*

INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION IS INFLUENCED by a combination of factors which include: the demands of the international labor market, the laws and regulations of the various states involved, and the motivation of individuals based on their assessment of the economic, political and social conditions in their natal countries in comparison with their perception of opportunities elsewhere. Since the migration flow is primarily from the underdeveloped to the industrially developed countries, migration is associated with underdevelopment. In this context, the underdeveloped countries form the "periphery" to the "core" capitalist countries which import labor along with other primary materials in response to the market demands of the core countries. Thus, migration is viewed as one of the consequences of underdevelopment, a dynamic process created by the concentration of capital in "core" countries. These components of migration will be discussed in this presentation, which will focus on the Commonwealth Caribbean with additional references to the migration process from the region as a whole. Moreover, the major characteristics of the post 1965 immigrant population will be discussed with an assessment of their search for the means to a better life.

The Caribbean is a consistent exporter of labor. This situation led to the observations that "West Indians learn early that success, psychological as well as economic and social, requires migration"; or that "West Indians are willing to sell anything to buy a passage because tens of

* Presented as part of the Five College Black Studies Seminar Series, Hampshire College, 10 March 1982.

thousands would rather live anywhere rather than in the West Indies." (Lowenthal, 1972: 216) On the other hand, citizens of the host countries who listen to these immigrants extolling the wonders of their homelands, often asked them "why they left." The contradictions embodied in these observations suggests that the "psychological predisposition" to live and find success elsewhere is only one aspect of the desire to emigrate. The response to the demands of the international labor market, has little to do, it seems, with the nationalistic feelings.

Despite the long period of contact with modern economies, the internal development of Caribbean countries has been slow and it now seems unlikely that development will ever reach the scale of the developed countries. Gordon Lewis provides a clue to the underdevelopment process in the Caribbean:

> ... For whatever the Great European Achievements since the century of genius may have been in art, technology, and science it must be remembered that for the Caribbean, as for most other colonial areas, there has been little chance of access to their enjoyment. European control has meant, on the contrary, exposure to the less attractive attributes of Europe, its lust for adventure, its drive for expansion, its search for quick profits, not least of all the racialist arrogance and pride of the European man as he made himself, after 1500, the conqueror of the Universe. (Lewis, 1968: 55)

Europe has relinquished political dominance in almost all its colonized areas, but the capitalist mode of production initiated during the period of expansion has coalesced in the accumulation of captial in a few "core" countries—primarily the North Atlantic region of Europe and North America—while those former colonized countries, now referred to as the Third World, remain intricately bound to these centers of capital accumulation in a dependency relationship—a periphery which supplies primary material and purchases manufactured goods from the industrialized countries. (Beckford, 1972; Amin, 197: ll. 1-22 V. I; Weisskoff, 1978.) Where accumulation of capital has occurred in Third World countries, it is due to the export of primary products (bauxite from Guyana and Jamaica; oil and asphalt from Trinidad and sugar, the original product which connected the Caribbean to the modern world economy).

The growth is usually not sustained in mining and manufacturing industries after certain basic infrastructural expenditures have been exhausted—construction of plants, roads, etc. The actual mining or manufacturing process requires trained personnel—often recruited from the country which provided the capital. The industries, more frequently than not, only extract raw material, the refinement and

conversion into consumer products are usually done elsewhere. Because unskilled workers do not move to other production areas in such industries, when basic infrastructural work ceases, many workers are again unemployed. Money accumulated during employment is sometimes invested in transportation cost to travel abroad in search of more permanent employment.

Rural peasants in Jamaica sell land, their only captial, to bauxite industries to earn cash capital to send themselves or their relatives abroad. Land in societies where agriculture has been degraded (except for sugar production) is not considered an asset since, even when it is worked, it accrues only subsistence income. Furthermore, the money paid by bauxite companies, is by peasant standards, superior to what such lands seem to be worth. These peasants do not know the value of the mineral deposits and are not informed by the purchasers.

The economic growth pattern in the region is uneven and sporadic. Trinidad is currently in an economic growth phase, the only Caribbean country with an economic surplus derived from oil reserves. Barbados, Guyana and Jamaica have had periods of unsustained economic expansion but, basically their social and economic infrastructures remain at the level of the rest of the Third World. The inability to sustain growth is blamed on the plantation-like economic structures inherited from political colonization which brought capital, enterprise, and management and created economic structures which have remained basically the same (Beckford: 1972). The societies continue to produce and market as they have done for centuries for an export market based upon foreign capital and foreign aid which demand an infrastructure, not based on the developmental needs of the countries but those which will ensure that capital flows back to the "core" countries.

Attempts at political reform bring swift sanctions from "core" capitalist countries. Cuba has experienced a long period of economic ostricism from the North Atlantic capitalist regimes and their satellites in other parts of the world, including the Caribbean and Latin America. Jamaica's attempt at economic reform beginning in 1972, crumbled by 1980. Grenada's valiant effort is hanging in the balance. On the other hand, to those countries with political regimes favorable to capital infiltration, economic assistance is more available; but even in these countries developmental potential has not been realized. Increasingly, over the last century, the United States has expanded its influence in the Caribbean, both economically and militarily—so that the area is now popularly referred to as the United States' "back yard" to be defended against political ideologies that are hostile to the unrestricted intrusion of capital in the region.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Migration from the Caribbean seems related to the "development" process in the area and reflects the changing configuration of the political and economic systems. Still, individuals are not motivated to emigrate until they have been assured that better opportunities are available elsewhere. Piore (1979; 1-9) argued that depravation in one's country is not sufficient motivation for individuals to make the decision to emigrate. But external stimuli, such as labor recruitment, set the process in motion.

In the Caribbean, the labor recruitment was targeted for work on sugar plantations developed by United States capital in Cuba and for work on the Panama Canal where French, and later, American interest were also involved. (Petras, 1980: 4-6). This infusion of United States capital in the area induced the movement of labor from areas of low economic production (Barbados, Jamaica and Haiti) to areas of capital investment and economic growth (Cuba, Panama and other Central American countries). When these sources of employment were exhausted, the United States became the new focus of immigrants.

The migration process, however, tends to maintain itself in what has been characterized as chain migration, involving families, relatives and others connected to previous immigrants (Portes, 1981: 5-6). Immigrants from the Caribbean fall into this category. Consciously and unconsciously, they become recruiters of labor by providing the means for relatives to emigrate and through the display of "evidence of success"—money and other material goods sent home to relatives, improvement in personal appearance and knowledge—on the occasion of return visits from the United States

The relatively few restrictions on entry into the United States—health standards and literacy—prior to 1924 enabled individuals who could pay their way to emigrate to the United States. The severe restriction after 1924 through legislation effectively stemmed the tide of immigrant flow. It was also an indication that the need for labor during that period had bottomed out. This need continued to decline and was only revived during and after the second world war.

IMMIGRATION RESTRICTIONS

Since the last two decades of the 19th century, immigrant labor has increasingly become a source of conflict in the United States between industries and organized labor. Industries relentlessly sought cheaper

sources of labor while organized labor fought to maintain its economic hegemony. The government became the broker between industry and labor, mediating the conflict through restriction of immigration whenever the economic conditions mandated. This began with the curb on Chinese migration in 1882 and extended to include all Asia by the creation of the "Asiatic barred zone" in 1917. Further restrictions culminated in the 1921 and 1924 Quota Acts which finally limited all immigration but still disproportionately. From northern and western Europe it was reduced by only 29% while from eastern and southern Europe by 87% (Bennett, 1969: 26). Racism played a prominent role in the restriction on immigrants.

Independent countries of the Western Hemisphere were granted nonquota status or unlimited migration. The British West Indies, although part of the Western Hemisphere, were also colonies of Great Britain and, consequently, subjected to its quota provision. Even so, the colonies did not benefit from the generous quota allotment (43% of the total European quota) since these benefits were not extended to the colonies. The desire to maintain the imagined Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition and the protection of the native labor force from the competition of immigrant labor were the dominant factors in the United States migration policies (Gossett, 1963: 173-75).

The 1924 Immigration Law remained in effect until 1952 when it was superseded by Public Law 414 (McCarran-Walter Act). This law was, however, a mere reorganization of the 1924 act, which established a preference system within the established quota arrangement based on the labor force needs of the United States. Skilled and professional workers were given first preference. Race as a condition for entry was eliminated but the racist orientation remained at the center of the reorganization. This general sentiment was expressed by the subcommittee on immigration:

> Without giving credence to any theory of Nordic superiority, the subcommittee believes that the adoption of the national origins formula was a rational and logical method of numerically restricting immigration in such a manner as to best preserve the sociological and cultural balance in the population of the United States. There is no doubt that it favors the people of Northern and Western Europe over those of Southern and Eastern Europe, but the subcommittee holds that the people who had the greatest contribution to the development of this country were fully justified in determining that the country was no longer a field for further colonization and henceforth, further immigration would not only be restricted but directed to admit immigrants because of the similarity of their cultural background to those of the principal components of our population (Bennett, 1966: 129-30).

By 1965, when a new Immigration law (Public Law 89-236) was enacted, the total migration from Europe (1820-1965) was just over 35 million while less than one million immigrants arrived in the United States from the Caribbean region (including Central America but excluding Puerto Rico after 1917). The immigration law of 1924 indicates not only the contraction in economic growth but also reveals the racial sentiments underlying the provision. It was the people of non-nordic origin who were excluded. These included Asians, British West Indians and Haitians. In spite of having "special Immigrants" status since 1924, only a small percentage of Haitians emigrate to the United States—229,961 as of June 1973 and only 54,055 with immigrant visas (Dominguez, 1975: 16). The granting of non-quota status to families of United States citizens and the provision for families and relations of resident aliens allowed for the continuous flow of immigrants, although on a reduced scale.

According to Senator Edward Kennedy (1965: 141) the major thrust of the 1965 law was the elimination of discriminatory provisions based on race and national origin. It was supposed to correct the injustices of the 1924 Quota Law. The race and nationality categories were eliminated but new conditions were imposed. These include limitation on the number of immigrant visas issued annually, Labor Department certification for immigrants to ensure that there was a demand for the particular skills, and that United States citizens were not deprived of such jobs.

WHO BENEFITTED

The basic change in immigration after 1965 was the immigrants' country of origin—Third World countries became major sources of immigration to the United States, including the Commonwealth Caribbean. Whereas "brawn" had previously been the primary requirement in labor from the Third World countries, the post-1965 migration included significant percentages of professional and skilled workers, Asia supplying a significant part of the former and Jamaica and Mexico of the latter (INS Annual Report 1967-1977). These characteristics will be discussed later with the questions concerning the "brain drain" and its effects on the development of the Third World countries.

The 1952 Law was explicit that immigration policies must benefit the United States not the sending countries; consequently, that underlying principle of the 1952 Law was not changed by the 1965 Law. The racist sentiments of the 1952 Act became a liability that the United States could no longer afford. Northern and western Europe were no longer

exporters of labor but had, themselves, become importers of labor, principally from southern Europe. The only reliable and available sources of surplus labor were now in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. Migration from all of South America has been very limited, 167,772 between 1956-1965; while there have been 183,931 from the Caribbean, 79,223 from Central America, 419,770 from Mexico and 321,682 from Canada.

The recent migrant population from the Caribbean has been classified as: Citizens—Puerto Ricans; Refugees—Cubans; immigrants and illegals—Dominicans, Haitians, and British West Indians (Dominguez, 1975: 2). While the categories are still valid, the configuration has changed and has become more complex for the region as a whole (including Central America). While economic conditions continue to be the underlying motivation, it has been compounded by political upheavals and repressions in the region which makes the distinction between political and economic refugees impossible (Bryce-Laporte 1976: 1-14). A statement on Caribbean nations by Ambassador Victor Palmari, United States Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, addressed this issue:

> . . . as you well know, political, social and economic crises have been brewing in the Caribbean for decades. Political systems range from various kinds of representative democracy to authoritative governments of the left and of the right. Throughout the region, economic pressures for emigration are intense. The stark contrast between economic prospects at home and those in the United States is the important factor motivating emigration to this country. The resulting brain drain deprives developing Caribbean nations not only of professional people but of artisans and technicians without whom there can be no meaningful development program.
>
> At the same time, this situation presents the United States with the dilemma of trying to allocate admissions numbers among the literally millions of people who would like to come to this country. (United States Department of State Bulletin, Aug. 1980: 74)

It is not only the internal political, economic, and social problems of Caribbean nations that create this dilemma but the policy of the United States for the region. The region has been courted and rejected according to the economic and military needs of the United States. The region has been used merely as an area for capital investments and markets, without regard for the social and economic needs of the people. On the other hand, the lines of contact between these countries and the United States have made the U.S. the place of refuge for those who see their economic interest—whether it be finding a stable job with adequate income or the unrestricted opportunity to engage in profit making

activities—threatened by underdevelopment and/or repressive political regimes.

Basically, emigration from the area, until recently, has been associated with the category known as "voluntary" immigrants. These include visa immigrants and Puerto Ricans who are citizens but have all the attributes and suffer the hardships immigrants face. The irony about the migration from Puerto Rico and the British Caribbean is that the largest outflows occurred when the countries were experiencing extensive economic growth (Christopulos, 1974: 123-263; Campos, 1980: 99-108; Demas, 1973: 236; Lewis, 1968: 401).

The dilemma, for the U.S., comes from the refugees, who have created not only administrative problems, as Mr. Palmari suggested, but who represent serious political implications along with the equally serious problem of integrating thousands of surplus workers in an economy which was already in serious trouble. Between 1959 and 1972, the United States admitted 621,403 Cubans fleeing the revolution and its aftermath. Unlike immigrants from other Caribbean nations, the Cubans, at least in the first wave (1959-61), represented the ruling political element, upper class, upper-echelon managers and employees of multi-national corporations and only a handful of others of undefined status who made their own way to Miami in small boats. The largest influx came between 1965 and 1973 when the Cuban government allowed the departure of Cubans with relatives in the United States, some 285,000. These refugees represented a decrease in class status of the general immigrant population (Dominquez 1975: 21-24). If Ambassador Palmari is correct, the economies of the entire region should be significantly impaired and the development process retarded by the massive exodus of the elite. However, it seems that United States policies in the region have greater long-term significance for development, than the departure of some of its citizens.

The anti-communist stance of the United States and its policy of accepting refugees from communist countries results in the unwilling acceptance of 125,000 new Cubans in 1980 (United States Department of State Bulletin, Dec. 1980: 44). On the other hand, Haitian refugees are not accorded the same consideration. It is claimed that Haitians are ineligible for political asylum because they are fleeing economic conditions, not political repression. Racism has been charged as the motive behind the denial of Haitians refugee status. Others argued that then-President, Carter, may have been reluctant to admit Haitians openly for fear of inviting trouble with Duvalier (*U.S. News & World Report*, May 5, 1980).

Ideology seems to have superseded common human concerns. The political or economic refugee argument is, at best, spurious. These comments of 1980 Cuban refugees (not representative of the 1980 Cuban refugee population), however, are instructive:

Alberto Castillo Rosell, 23, a prisoner in the Atlanta penitentiary: "I never expected to leave one prison to come to another. I was hoping to find a nice place to live and a good job so I could be on my way." (He was in Cuban prison for arson.)

Rosa Rodriguez Orama, 30, lives with her husband in a gas station bathroom in Miami: "We were poor in Cuba, but at least I had more comforts than this. I made a mistake in coming" (*Time*, May 18, 1981: 27).

If there were no expectations of economic gain, how many Cubans or Haitians would leave their countries? If many in the first elite Cuban group of refugees could not protect their economic interest by coming to the United States or elsewhere would they have left Cuba? Similarly, a group of upper-class Jamaicans fled to Miami from the Democratic socialist regime of Michael Manley. And a similar group of Nicaraguans has fled the Sandinistist regime in Nicaragua and also found asylum in Florida. El Salvador refugees, however, are not allowed to land but are hastily sent back to their war-torn country. Political (economic) refugees, citizens, voluntary immigrants or illegal aliens all are motivated by the same conditions even if they are differently ordered.

The migration process has been disrupted and will continue to be chaotic as long as political ideological posturing dominates relationships between the United States and the Caribbean. Since the United States represents itself as the bastion of political democracy, but continues to support right wing repressive regimes while making explosive statements about "left wing repressive regimes," unregulated migration from the region will continue to be a political embarrassment.

Ideally, migration is an orderly process by which immigrants are carefully selected to meet labor force requirements. It is also motivated by individuals searching for the means to a better life. This section will deal specifically with characteristics of Commonwealth Caribbean immigrants who arrive under the auspices of the 1965 immigration law.

A brief overview of the migration from the Commonwealth Caribbean reveals these major characteristics:

(1) Women were the majority especially between 1967 and 1969. Thereafter the numbers reached relative parity.

(2) The majority of the immigrants migrated alone rather than as family units.

(3) The majority of visas were issued to private household workers.
(4) The number of immigrants in the dependent category increased significantly 1969-present.
(5) The professional technical and clerical categories were significantly represented.
(6) The majority of the immigrants were individuals in the prime working years, nineteen to forty-nine years old.
(United States Immigration and National Service Annual Reports 1965-1977.)

The predominance of women in the migration from the Caribbean is related to the number of visas issued to private household workers 1967-69 and explains why so many individuals migrated alone instead of in family units. The demand for "live-in" private household workers represented a scarcity in the native labor force—usually black American women. If account is taken of the fact that the period was one of expanded educational and occupational opportunities and increased social welfare benefits for black Americans then the relationship is predictable between those factors and the demand for unskilled female labor in increased numbers. Other categories of women were also issued visas: nurses, secretaries, and other clerical workers.

PROFESSIONAL AND SKILLED WORKERS

The demand for nurses was acute, especially in metropolitan hospitals where work conditions were considered less than ideal by native workers. The proliferation of nursing homes was also a contributory factor in the demand, although unskilled individuals were in greater demand there. Nurses are the largest category in the Professional, Technical and Kindred (PTK) immigrant category. Some of the doctors were also women and, by and large, health care personnel are overwhelmingly represented in the PTK category. While the lure of higher incomes was the dominant factor motivating the professional migration, many included educational opportunities and professional growth as their reason for emigrating (Palmer 1976: 49-50). Nurses especially have low occupational morale. Some with advanced training find it difficult to work with the administrative staff which is usually selected on the basis of seniority and not by administrative skills or technological knowledge. The frustration of coping with inadequate equipment, regressive administration and inadequate income are combined in the decision to emigrate. Male immigrants are predominant in the skilled and semiskilled worker categories.

The number of doctors leaving the Commonwealth Caribbean is statistically significant for the countries but, over all, is not significant in the overall migration; compared to the migration from Asia where, in some cases, professionals represent more than 50% of the total migration in any year. However, the "brain drain" argument is viable, since the professional and skilled workers represent a loss of trained personnel who are likely to be employed and not readily replaced. There is no native pool of reserve workers in these categories. Furthermore, it has been argued that the advantage in giving preference to professionals over skilled and unskilled workers is the acquisition of highly trained new workers in areas where they are required at relatively little cost to the United States (Abrams and Abrams, 1975: 10-11). It could be argued also that this practice enables training institutions in the U.S. to continue a discriminatory policy in the selection and training of professionals in certain areas, e.g., medical schools. Elites in any country tend to demonstrate similar characteristics. Consequently, foreign doctors may be preferable to native minorities.

This migrating pattern also indicates defective planning or lack of planning strategies in anticipating the labor force needs. But if the acquisition of a cheaper, more manipulable labor force is desirable, then this may be a deliberate strategy. In either case, it is not without its consequences.

Dependents are the price the host society must pay for workers in demand. Caribbean immigrants tend to regroup after the adult has established some measure of economic security for the family. This is not without problems, especially when the family head is a working female divorced from the kin-network. Again, because many immigrants are poor they live in neighborhoods classified as "undesirable" which imply faulty school systems and inadequate social and recreational services. Problems are already manifested in escalating school drop-out rates and difficulties with the law (Gordon, 1980).

Upward mobility is the motivating force behind individual decision to emigrate. Bryce-Laporte (1979: 225) reminded us that

> The new Caribbean immigrants entered the country then, at a different point of development of world capitalism witnessing both the fluctuating political economy of the United States and political transformation of the nation's cities . . .

Unlike earlier immigrants, the recent immigrants are faced with cutbacks in the very areas that provided social mobility to the children of the early immigrants. This is not to suggest that a whole immigrant population is condemned by economic vagaries. There is a selection pro-

cess which allows for upward mobility of some. Women have used the education system, found stable jobs, and become more self-reliant. A new class of entrepreneurs have emerged which specialize in providing services to the Caribbean community. These include doctors and dentists. It seems very likely that some immigrants will achieve the economic mobility they sought but with stiffer competition and the possibility of regression after making gains in education, employment and social services.

On the other hand, some will join the ranks of the urban under-class, excluded from employment either by choice or circumstances. The group that will suffer the consequences of having migrant status is the children of immigrants who are unable to adapt to or acquire the skills necessary for social mobility in a world of contracting opportunities.

WHAT CONSEQUENCE TO THE "SENDING" AND "RECEIVING" SOCIETIES

Starting in the late 1950s, arguments had been advanced both for and against migration from the English-speaking Caribbean. Some argued that migration depleted the human resources of the societies, taking the most productive in the population (Davidson, 1962; Roberts and Mills, 1958). The counter argument was that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. The advantages cited were: stability of the unemployment rate, reduction in population and population increase through the migration of persons in their prime reproductive years, and creation of a favorable balance of payment (Tidrick, 1966). The area has been characterized as having a "surplus labor economy" (Lewis, 1958: 401) with economic growth taking place without a corresponding or significant increase in employment.

The more recent arguments center around the post-1965 migration mainly to the United States and focuses on the "brain drain" and its contribution to the under-development (Watson, 1976; Girling, 1974; Palmer, 1972). Girling especially argued that the export of low-level skill does not compensate for the professional and skilled workers. What is needed is an evaluation of the relative value of each category of immigrants to determine loss or gain to the society.

The United States on the other hand, has gained needed trained and unskilled workers. A recent New York *Times* editorial (February 25, 1980) reported that New York City is lobbying for the delay of legislation that will severely limit the influx of foreign trained doctors. These doctors specialized in areas that are shunned by American-trained

doctors and work in municipal health care centers where salaries are low and facilities limited. Nurses and other health care personnel work in similar situations. Thus, immigrants serve in essential service areas, especially in inner cities where resources are limited. Unskilled workers serve in private households with low salaries, long working hours and few or no benefits, or in service occupations where it is difficult to recruit native workers. The work situation, although unattractive to native workers, represents net economic gain to immigrants in terms of regular employment and to the host country in terms of savings on training and salaries if its natives were employed.

The immigrants from the Caribbean usually expect more than low status jobs and mainly take advantage of the educational opportunities to improve their socio-economic status. In this way, not only is the immediate demand for low-skilled workers satisfied but, as Bryce-Laporte (1977: 21) noted, these immigrants have already registered their influence in more diffused employment activities. This represents a shift in the ethnic composition of certain jobs and professional categories in the United States. This is especially true of New York City where the one major liability to the society is the cost of the immigrants' dependents. At this time, the host country has not responded to any of their special needs, possibly because, so far, they have not been articulated or properly identified.

Migration is the search for a very elusive means to the better life—the possibilities of finding it is constantly being reduced for the many and only sporadically open to a few in periods of economic growth. The new Caribbean Basin Initiative is intended to keep Caribbean people in the Caribbean while opening up new investment possibilities for United States capital—the pattern has not changed.

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